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Towards a Pedagogy of Group Work

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## Towards a Pedagogy of Group Work

Working the Rhetoric of Group Work in an Undergraduate Curriculum and Pedagogy Unit at the University of Ballarat

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*Abstract: This paper explores the possibilities suggested by the rhetoric of the literature and public documents as to the value, and indeed necessity, of group work projects in undergraduate teacher education and deliberate and systematic teaching of group work protocols and processes in a cohort of undergraduates in the first year of their Bachelor of Education degrees. It explores the implications for teaching group work as part of pedagogical design.*

Keywords: Group Work, Pedagogy, Undergraduate Teacher Education

### Rhetoric

**T**HE SHORTER OXFORD Dictionary (1936) definition of a group as noun is 'an assemblage of figures or objects forming together either a complete design, or a distinct portion of one', with the verb resulting from this as 'so as to form a harmonious whole' (p. 387). This would seem to be a simple enough concept to work with, yet the amount and type of literature on group work (also often referred to as working in teams) would give it the status of an ideology, especially if one considers ideology as a sort of 'bundle of ideas' which societies or groups within societies share as 'ideas or assumptions about the world, about how it is or should be organised and about the place or role of people in it' (Stevens & Watson, 1994) p. 14. Indeed, the whole world seems to share the same bundle of ideas about the importance of group or team work right now.

Even a brief overview of the literature on the topic leads to a multitude of more literature that sets about defining what group work is, even to the implications that it has for democratic society. McDermott (2002), for example, goes from definitions given by Cox and Caldwell (2000) of group work as a feature of social capital, to Lyons (2000) of group work as part of trust mechanisms that neither exclude nor 'demonise' non-members, to Putnam (1995; 2000) of group work that is essential to making democracies work, to Forsyth (1999) of group work as experience and process rather than product (in Mc Dermott, 2002). Johnson and Johnson (2000) have written their book around other sets of similar definitions, including

that of Durkheim's notion of primary groups as the building blocks of any society (p. 20). As far as the teaching profession is concerned, teacher educators and their students have formally-listed graduate teacher attributes given as part of public statements in the field (see for example (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 1998; Victorian Institute of Teaching, 2005) The attributes listed include the capacity to work as members of professional groups or teams, demonstrating the sorts of interpersonal professional skills deemed desirable in a graduate. As well as what is given in such documents, our review of over 100 position descriptions for graduate positions in schools show that potential employers ask candidates to address criteria that are quite specific in relation to *demonstrating* their ability to work as members of professional teams. We emphasise the word in italics, for graduates have to be able to show that they can indeed do this, and not just make the claim that they would be able to is they had to.

### Group Work

Not only that, but there is any number of features of group work to take into consideration. Johnson and Johnson (2000) canvas some off these. They identify and describe the pseudo-group, whose members may have been assigned to work together but who never do as they are more concerned with how their performance is ranked against that of others', resulting in rivalry rather than sort of cooperative endeavour that Durkheim envisages. This is more of an aggregate than a group, as indeed is the traditional group whose members have been assigned to work together



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in the belief that they will be rewarded as individuals rather than as members of a team (Johnson & Johnson, 2000, p. 22). Johnson and Johnson (2000) also identify and describe the effective group (which may just be good enough for most of us working in education), which is much more than the sum of its parts, committed to working together and happy doing just that. They hold each other accountable as to members performing their fair share of the work that the group engages, they promote each other's successes, and in the process they reach a desirable level of effectiveness (Johnson & Johnson, 2000, p. 23). Yet there is more: there is the High Performance Group, which is all that the effective group is, and more, as it outperforms all reasonable expectations of any group (Johnson & Johnson, 2000, p. 24).

### Underpinning the Project

Given such a context, teacher educators find themselves in a situation where they are to juggle a number of stances on the issue, perhaps not all of them in agreement with each other, but to be negotiated nonetheless. It is of course, always possible to react as simply as possible and write in a number of group assignments as part of a teaching and learning program, thereby fulfilling any regulatory requirements to implement state and commonwealth government policy as to group work in teacher education programs. Yet we would argue that implementing policy and guidelines in such ways is a limited and limiting approach to employing group work in programs. The following is a vignette produced by a colleague in a workshop held at our University in 2003:

Yesterday's tutorial was a nightmare for [the tutor]. The students were meant to be presenting summaries of the group projects that they had been working on for weeks. The first few groups did quite well. At least they had some sophisticated work to report on even though it was clear that poor communication skills detracted from the contributions of some students. During these early presentations some of the other students were obviously distracted and edgy. One group asked for extra time because they weren't ready. When [the tutor] asked for an explanation, things fell apart! Their explanations disintegrated into recriminations. Some students were very angry; they said they weren't ready because some people were too disorganised, or had not even tried to make a contribution. Others said 'it isn't fair to give them extra time; this is the day we were supposed to be assessed'. Students from various groups joined in asking why everyone in the group should get the same mark when some people did most of the work and were far better students anyway.

Several students spoke of cooperation being hopeless and hating group work. [The tutor] was astonished; during seminars the students often do learning activities in groups and seem to get a lot out of it...

We would argue that most academics who use group work as part of their teaching and learning strategies would have similar stories as this tutor's to tell. Our own work as teacher educators with a combined experience of about twenty years in a number of different institutions at home and abroad suggest that the tutor's story is not at all an uncommon one, and that neither is the resulting cohort of students who have come to loathe the very idea of having to work with another or others in completing tasks required of them in their under- and even postgraduate programs. Such stories have provided us with the sort of anecdotal data that forms so much of research into teaching and learning (van manen, 1989). Much of the casual conversations over coffee in the office allow a worker within an organisation to get a feel of the culture, of the successes, of the failures, of the events to rejoice or to despair over. It is a world of anecdotes that helps keep the networking going and fuels the brainstorming and problem solving sessions in which we engage, as van Manen (1989) suggests: 'It is worth noting that in everyday life the anecdote is probably the most common device by which people talk about their experiences [which] allows the person to reflect in a concrete way on experience and thus appropriate that experience' (p. 232). It is this sort of activity that helped to inform the initial planning procedures into our research into the development of a pedagogy of group work. As we discussed the issues that had come to the fore in the course of our operations, we were telling each other stories of individual students at our university, and while we dealt with these on the individual bases they obviously need, we were also able to identify emerging patterns. It had become apparent that it was wrong to assume that students embark upon a group work program as a means of shoring up democracy or of building up social capital or anything else. We found that some students are quite prepared to put their names down for a group project with no intention of completing their share of any work involved, and what is more, that they will select the people they think will be most likely to get high marks so that they will get that same mark with minimal or no input from themselves.

We had found ourselves helpless in the face of blatant student exploitation of other students, and helpless in the face of hard-working students' helplessness when it came to having their work exploited by unscrupulous others. What we designed, then, was not only to engage students in what it means to be a successful working member of a group; it was

also designed as a mechanism for ensuring fairness in the allocation of group marks as assignments were completed, submitted and assessed. The three aims of the project have been fairness, accuracy in assessment, and student self reflection.

### The Effective Group

Not trying for the High Performance Group, we settled on the Effective Group as the aim for our pedagogy. To this end we explored the literature for advice, including the students in that exploration. Basing our explorations largely on what may be considered the very simple yet so obvious advice of making student learning possible (Ramsden, 2003), we explored further advice on the Web and in books, journals and edited books. What we ended up with was important informing literature, such as that of the *Centre for Academic Leadership* at Washington State University (2003), which helped us out with descriptors of effective group work, and (Heathfield, 1999).

From these, we generated a table of criteria for self and group assessment, which required all group members to assess individual and group achieve-

ments, write a justification for the assessments they had made, and for each member of the group to sign off in conjunction with other members of the group. The important point of this exercise is that it makes the criteria explicit, it makes them public, and group members have to talk to each other about the marks that they allocate and the statements that they make in support of the marks. An interesting feature of the exercise is that of further personal interaction that requires a certain maturity of response to the students' own work, as they are required to monitor their own progress on the basis of the criteria given, and this provides a mechanism by which they can intervene if necessary if the group is not working as well as they would like. What we had not really anticipated was the effectiveness of the table and its evaluative functions in providing students with a mechanism by which they could take the steps necessary to pull non-performing members into line, even to the extent of refusing to sign off on a non-performer's self evaluation if they felt that it was not truly reflective of the work that they claimed that they had performed. A copy of the sheet is given below:

#### Self Assessment Criteria: Group Project

Worth 20	Worth 0	Mark Justification	/20
<i>Regular attendance at meetings</i> Attended all meetings Stayed to agreed end Worked within timeframe Was active and attentive Flexible re meeting times	Missed several/most meetings Always/often late Left early Was inattentive: mucked around Did not accommodate others' meeting needs		
<i>Contribution of ideas</i> Thought in advance of meetings Provided workable ideas taken up Built on others' ideas Prepared to discuss ideas, not keep quiet	Didn't come prepared Didn't provide ideas Rejected others' ideas out of hand Didn't talk about meeting objectives		
<i>Researching, analyzing, preparing material own learning</i> Did what I said I would do Did equal share of research Helped equally to analyse and evaluate material Can articulate what I learned	Did no research Didn't do what was promised Didn't manage the workload Didn't get involved with the activities Do not know if I have learned anything at all		
<i>Contribution to group processes</i> Listened to others Encouraged participation by others	Spoke over others/ignored their ideas Kept ideas/opinions to yourself Refused to take on tasks		



Took on different roles as needed Enabled a collaborative learning environment	Insensitive to the learning needs of group/pair		
<i>Practical contribution to end product</i> Willing to try doing new things Did not hog the tasks Not leaving the tasks to others Contributed equally to high standard presentation	Not willing to take on any task Did not take on any responsibilities Had to be checked up on by others Made limited, poor quality contribution Prepared to take the credit for others' work		

Student Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Group endorsement

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Indeed, we found that in the three years that the project has been running only three times have students resorted to refusing to endorse the claims of other group members, who have then had to draw on what reserves they had of interpersonal skills to retrieve the situation for themselves. We have been impressed by the professionalism and tact with which the students have handled potentially awkward situations with their peers, as we have with the fact that we no longer had students helpless before us, feeling

exploited by their more unscrupulous peers in trying to cash on their hard work. An unanticipated outcome of this has been the requests for students in subsequent units to have similar mechanisms in relation to group work put in place.

However, we also had to monitor the effectiveness of the group, and not just its individual members. Again, adapting Heathfield (1999), we produced another table, based on similar interactive principles and justification for evaluations. It is given below:

**Group Assessment Criteria**

Criteria	Member Names			
	Member Marks & Comments			
Contribution of ideas /20				
Researching, analysing, preparing material. own learning /20				
Contribution to group processes /20				
Practical contribution to end product /20				
Totals				Group Mark

Member Signatures: \_\_\_\_\_

At the end of three years, we have a considerable amount of data to consider as to how effective the project has been, and we have chosen a representative sample for the purposes of this paper. The students in this activity demonstrated that the construction of

the task contributes to three key areas: fairness, accuracy in assessment and self reflection. Each of these is dealt with in the following sections. This data consists of a vignette, quantitative data derived from the feedback sheets and quotes from students

in which they justify their own self assessment. We have focused on a group within a larger group, drawing on the vignette that they have provided, and then examined that larger group as a whole.

### **Fairness**

The students in this activity demonstrated a concern that any assessment was fair, and that it reflected the effort that they had contributed to the group. The following vignette illustrates how one group, due to their circumstances, encountered difficulties in ensuring that all contributed equally.

#### **Vignette**

Alice, Brenda, Cindy, Denice and Edwina are a group of students who investigated legislation and regulations concerning schools. They soon discovered that such a topic would involve a large amount of work for each of them and that it would be a far more difficult assignment to complete than they had originally imagined. Added to this, the students did not have much experience with using web based presentations. Also, the students did not live near each other and found great difficulty in meeting to exchange ideas. The end result of this was that one of the group members, Alice, agreed to coordinate the group activity and develop the website, although this ended up being the major part of the work involved. It was acknowledged by the group that she had carried a far greater burden than she should have. The final assignment was well done, and yet none of the group attempted to claim more credit than was their due, allocating themselves and Alice appropriate marks in their feedback sheets. Three of the group actually approached the marker of their assignment to reinforce the fact that they felt Alice deserved more credit than the rest of the group including themselves. They seemed pleased that in the end this occurred

It was evident that this group was concerned with the fairness of the assessment undertaken in this assignment, even to the detriment of their own personal marks. It is interesting that the group were prepared to undertake such an approach to their learning despite the individualized nature of assessment in universities. It may be argued that the nature of the assignment created an atmosphere of collegiality among the groups that would not have been possible without the mechanism for feedback that was provided. This means of feedback was important in allowing the students to contribute to the fairness of their marks in an equitable manner. It permitted the assessor to make a valid judgment of the students' contribution such that there was no imperative for

students to artificially inflate their own personal assessment.

### **Accuracy**

The students in this assignment made assessment of themselves and of the others in their group in a reliable manner. In the data presented below (see Table 1), it is evident that the student self assessment closely reflected the assessment of their peers. In the majority of instances, the student self assessment was accurately reflected in the assessment of their peers, indicating that their self assessment was grounded in appropriate self reflection. Most students accurately ranked themselves in terms of their contribution to the efforts of the group, either in terms of a positive or less positive features.

**Table 1: Peer and Group Assessment**

Grp	Number of group members	Highest Ranked by Self Assessment	Peer rankings	% Agreement (includes self assessment)	Lowest ranked by self assessment	Peer rankings	% Agreement (includes self assessment)
1.	4	Cathy/ Josephine	Cathy: 1,1,1 Josephine: 1,1,1	100	Ethel	4,4, 4,	100
2.	4	Bill.	1,1,2	75	Byron	4, 4, 4, 4	100
3.	4	Alice	Alice: 2,2,1	Alice: 25	Tessa	4, 4, 3	75
4.	3	Sean/ Santo	Sean: 1,1 Santo: 1,1	100	Dennis	3, 3.	100
5.	3	Garry	1,1	100	Michelle/Ricky	Michelle& Ricky Equal 2 <sup>nd</sup> , Equal 2 <sup>nd</sup> .	100
6.	5	Penelope	1,1,1,1	100	Jonica	Equal 4 <sup>th</sup> ,equal 2 <sup>nd</sup> (3 others), equal 2 <sup>nd</sup> (1 other) equal 2 <sup>nd</sup> (3 others).	80
7.	3	Heather	1,1	100	Michael	3,3	100

Penelope (group 6), for example, ranked herself first in relation to her performance compared with the other members of her group, The other four members of her group also ranked her first, demonstrating a complete agreement within the group regarding Penelope’s contribution to the assignment. Similar results were obtained for Groups 1 (Cathy & Josephine), 4 (Sean & Santo), 5 (Garry) and 7 (Heather). Anomalous data was found in group 3, where none of the participants rated themselves as the best performing member of the group. In this instance, Alice, who ranked herself second, was the group member who considered her own performance most worthy. In the opinion of herself and her peers, however, it was another group member, Rachael, who was the best performing member of the group. Rachael, interestingly, ranked herself last of the four group members.

Such situations did not occur in relation to the lowest ranked performer in each group. In all situations there was at least one person who ranked themselves lowest (or equal lowest). In five of the groups (1,2,4,5 & 7) there was complete agreement between this self assessment and the assessment of peers. In the other two groups (3 & 6) there was a majority of agreement. What appears to be an issue that may need further research is the inability of some groups to provide sufficient discrimination between

the efforts of members of their group. In groups 1, 4, 5 & 6 there were instances where students ranked at least two group members equally on a scale of 1 to 100. While it entirely possible for this to be the case, it would appear that there needs to be some tracking of student decision making, and their consideration of the criteria that is used to provide information, as well as the criteria and format for reporting itself.

It may therefore be argued that the use of self and peer assessment represented a reliable manner in which to collect assessment data on student performance in this group activity. A key aspect of the unit that the students are undertaking is professional reflection (see for example Zeegers, Russell & Smith, 2004), and these results indicate they are willing to make assessments of their own performance that are valid, despite university assessment procedures that emphasise individual achievement. The results also indicate areas for further investigation into the use of such assessment protocols, particularly the decision making processes utilised by students to arrive at their assessments.

**Student Reflection**

The written reflection of the students indicates that they have an ability and willingness to comment ac-

curately on their performance. Rachael, for instance notes that:

I worked well with everyone's ideas, but could have contributed more of my own.

Carly comments that she:

...came a little prepared, not as well as the others.

Bill, while rated highly by the others in his group, as well as in his own self assessment, is prepared to offer that he:

...could have been more involved beyond the research phase.

As might be expected, some students are less than critical of their own performance, and offer little in

the way of constructive self assessment. It should, however, be noted that of the 25 respondents, 13 offered a critique of their performance that identified at least one area of weakness in their efforts. These critiques ranged from being late for meetings, to identifying a lack of preparation or work. They are a far cry for the expressed loathing of group work activities suggested by our opening vignette and our anecdotal evidence as to group work. Our project exploring a pedagogy of group work so far serves highlight the potential for courses in teacher education to develop critical self appraisal in students within the possibilities offered by a pedagogical approach to group work, this last being a key aspect of professionalism for teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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